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ABSTRACT

The Los Angeles Section, National Council of Jewish Women, has developed an innovative pilot program in day care geared to the changing life style of child rearing by single parents. Home-SAFE provides children a warm, secure environment in supervised, subsidized, licensed day care homes, and includes enrichment activities by trained volunteers; professional counseling to working mothers, children, and day care mothers; group counseling for working single parents providing an opportunity to discuss and solve common problems of loneliness of single parenthood, child rearing, and individual concerns and conflicts. (Author/CS)

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HOME-SAFE: A NEW APPROACH IN DAY CARE FOR THE YOUNG CHILD

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What is Home-SAFE? Home-SAFE is a concept of service to young children and their parents that has become a reality under the Los Angeles Section of National Council of Jewish Women hereafter referred to as "Council". Growing out of years of research and study on the need for child care for the single working parent, and from its participation in the National Council of Jewish Women's study on day care needs, entitled "Windows on Day Care" the Los Angeles Section inaugurated a new concept of day care for the pre-sch[illegible] child.[15] Home-SAFE, in which the SAFE stands for "services aiding family equilibrium" offers infants and young children the intimacy of family life and the opportunity for group experience in an unusual program.

The need for day care for children of working parents has been so well established and recognized that little can be added.[1,11,12,14] The more important question for those in the mental health professions, is the availability of quality day care and a clear delineation of the kind best suited to meet the needs of the individual child and his parent. Keyserling, who coordinated the "Windows on Day Care" study, and others report on wide variations of quality in all kinds of day care programs.[15] Although institutionally based group care in day care centers and nurseries is often seen by both the public and professionals alike as having higher status than family day care, Council members participating in the Keyserling study found family day care homes at their best offered developmental opportunities fully equal to that of superior day care centers. Indeed family day care homes are the largest provider of day care for pre-schoolers outside of their own home. The Keyserling report, however, makes note of the lack of enrichment programs in many family day care homes as a limitation. At its 1968 annual Convention, Council made a national commitment to the cause of day care with each Section selecting its own particular project in meeting this commitment. The Los Angeles Section, which contributed heavily to the "Windows on

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Day Care" study, explored many avenues of day care before evolving the present pilot program, Home-SAFE.

The parent most in need of day care for her child is the single parent whose only option is usually to work or be on welfare. With long waiting lists at day care centers, and no readily available expertise in finding and judging the adequacy of a family day care home, a single parent is left to cope as best she can in trying to find care for her child. The problem is especially acute if the child is under two.

Single parenthood by definition is a problem, with generally the total economic burden falling on the parent who has custody of the child. Despite an increase in fathers having custody of pre-school children, the preponderance of single parents in this country rearing young children are mothers. These women experience discrimination in many aspects of their lives including employment opportunities, "What happens if your child is sick?" and housing, "No children allowed". A single parent tends to be looked upon as an individual who has somehow failed in our society, and therefore one who should pay the penalty for her failure through struggle. In addition to all the external societal pressures, the single mother has more than her share of emotional stress. Feelings of loneliness, emotional isolation, the lack of adult companionship, someone with whom one can interact and discuss issues of child rearing, discipline, as well as the frequent emotional or geographic distance from an extended family, are the lot of the single parent. The proliferation of single parent associations adequately attest to the tremendous social and emotional needs of this group.

Growing out of its concern for the developmental needs of infants and pre-school children, and the emotional and social needs of their parents, the concept of Home-SAFE was born. Home-SAFE provides infants and pre-school children with care in a nedwork of especially selected licensed family day care homes. Enrichment activities for the children in the homes are provided by trained volunteers from the Los Angles Section, National Council of Jewish Women. Fees to parents are on a sliding

scale, and group and individual counseling is available to parents. Day care mothers are provided with professional consultation. The firancial cost is underwritten by the Los Angeles Section. The entire program is under a day care management committee of the Section and the leadership of the project director, who is a highly trained and experienced psychiatric social worker.

In contrast to day care centers and nursery schools, family day care has kept a low profile in a public view of low status kind of child care.[5] Studies in New York and elsewhere found that groups of mothers would have preferred the high prestige of a child care center, viewing the centers as having more to offer their children.[18,27]

This public image is in marked contrast to the close examination that has been given by professionals such as Prescott, Sale, Emlen and others on the distinct advantages of family day care over center care.[20,22,24] In a recent study comparing modes of day care, Prescott found that family day care offered children important opportunities for emotional development not found in day care centers.[19] In family day care, adults were more available to the children and there were important opportunities for individual development. Also the supports for self esteem were noted to be high in family day care.

Aside from the obvious advantages in providing care for infants and siblings, family day care has other important assets.[4] As an adaptation of family life, it has far more marked similarities to the child's own home than the best of day care centers, thereby minimizing transition from home to child care. It provides for the flexible scheduling that meets the needs of the children and their parents.[23] In family day care the mildly sick child can be cared for, freeing his own mother from the need to lose a day's work. All importantly it provides the kind of open, natural environment in which the child needs to learn to live; close interpersonal relationships with adults and other children; the opportunity for the child to move into new experiences at his own pace.[7] Expectations are likely to be more individually than group oriented and achievements measured in relation to the child's own capacity rather than to a

"group norm". For the only child, sibling relationships are available. Quality family day care offers the best in family life and group experience that a young child can have other than his own home. For his parent, it offers a kind of extended family, which in the life of the single parent can be equally important.

Recognizing the need of children of single parents to experience wholesome family life, Home-SAFE has endeavored to select day care homes in which both parents are present, and the day care father is home for significant periods of time while the children are there. Since our program is non-denominational and interracial, both the children and day care homes represent a broad spectrum of community life. It is like viewing a miniature meeting of the United Nations, when one sees our day care families and children together. Selection of the day care home for each child is based primarily on the needs of the child, and secondarily on location, hours of employment and available transportation. The day care homes accomodate three to six children, the maximum number of children permitted being determined by the State licensing department.

Payment to the day care homes is made by Council at the prevailing rate for family day care, with an extra subsidy for caring for the children one evening a week when the parents attend the group session. Day care homes are provided with equipment and toys as needed. Professional consultation to the day care mother is given by the project director. From its Council membership, Home-SAFE has developed a corps of volunteers who provide enrichment activities in the day care homes. These women who are intuitively talented in working with children are provided with specialized training. Their activities in the day care home cover a wide range of activities in meeting the needs of the children. For a young child it may mean sitting on a lap and having a story read. For another child, it may be a walk around the block with many stops to examine leaves and blades of grass and to hear a bird sing. The walking trip down to the local cobbler is a regular outing that one 3-year old eagerly looks forward to having with his volunteer. A special volunteer identified by the

children as the "puppet lady", brings the experience of working with and making puppets to the children. Puppet figures are used not only to re-enact favorite stories, but to act out and resolve emotional and interpersonal conflicts that a child may be experiencing. We have had the added good fortune of a council member whose husband is a regular volunteer. Children cluster around him in ways reminiscent of the Pied Piper, and bespeak their tremendous needs of a relationship with a man who can meet some of these needs.

Augmenting the volunteer services is a more formalized and structured pre-school program for the Home-SAFE children provided by the Los Angeles Unified School District and the Fairfax Community Adult School.[9] One morning a week, day care mothers with the children and volunteers meet with the credentialed teacher and other mothers and children from the community. The School program provides not only appropriate nursery school activities for the children, but a parent education component for the day care mothers with group discussions of discipline, child development and related subjects. Our observations of the Home-SAFE children in the pre-school program support those of Caldwell and others concerning children who had day care experience.[2,3,26] Our children, in contrast to those from the community, seem more able to cope with complexities of the program and to experience less frsutration and separation anxiety. Our observations further suggest that the children in Home SAVE have already mastered the anxiety of separation, and that positive experiences in day care have helped them cope successfully with it. The children appear to have developed that essential quality described by Erickson as "basic trust".

A review of our program during the first six months of operation totalled twenty children and eighteen parents. There was an approximately fifty percent turnover, a figure paralleling the study of family day care in Portland, Oregon.[6] The greatest turnover came within the first three months of placement, again similar to that found in Portland. In contrast to the Portland community, our Home-SAFE program has been located in the Hollywood area of Los Angeles, an area well known for its high

transiency and related problems. It is also an area identified by the Welfare Council as in great need of child care services.[8]

The children in care have ranged in age from eight months to slightly over five years, with the median age at the time of placement being two years and four months. A disproportionate number, almost eighty percent, have been girls. The preponderance of children have been white; there have been several black children, and a combination of white and black, and oriental and white. Somewhat less than half of the children were born out of wedlock, and several others conceived before marriage. Our brief experience in family day care suggestes a definite, though possibly unconscious, bias of unmarried parents in favor of family day care. The bias was also noted in a Canadian study where forty-four percent of the parents utilizing family day care were unmarried.[21]

The children's mothers have ranged in age from early twenties to early thirties, with a median age of twenty-six. Occupations range from bartender to managerial positions, though the majority of mothers are employed in clerical and secretarial positions. Nearly all the group studied had been on the job less than one year, with many having frequent changes of employment. Over half the group have been on welfare, and many continue to receive public aid supplements. Most operate on a marginal income, with the average monthly income being $485.00 a month. Parents have learned of our program from diverse sources, including newspapers, posters in markets and other public places, the Department of Social Services, etc., and more recently, from parents in the program. Although when the program was originally designed, it was seen as a resource to a mixed ethnic neighborhood including young Jewish single mothers, in the first six months we had no Jewish parent in the program. Only one parent had any active religious affiliation whatsoever. Astrology, meditation and similar interests appear to serve as contemporary substitutes in this regard.

Very few of the parents have any meaningful family ties. Many are geographically separated from their families, and those whose families are in the area often have

estranged and conflictual relationships. Thus, very few of the children have the advantage of meaningful relationships with grandparents and other extended family ties.

The parents' discussions suggest that they are a sexually liberated group of women. They freely discuss the use of the Pill, and their relationships with men. They firmly believe that sexual behavior should not take place in front of their children, but observation of the childrens' behavior suggestes that this doctrine is at least occasionally honored in the breach. However, the parents are visibly distressed when precocious, or even normal, sexual behavior is observed in their children.

From a clinical viewpoint, the parents utilizing our service have shown varying degress of psychopathology from relatively stable young women to a few exhibiting acute psychotic processes. The behavior of the majority, past and present, suggest characterological problems. Some were heavily involved in the drug scene, and others on a more experimental basis. Several had prior psychiatric treatment.

The group modality was selected as the treatment of choice in working with a single parent.[10,17] It was recognized that many of the parents might be well functioning young women whose basic need was child care. However, regardless of one's adequacy, single parenthood has its own unique features, and we believed it was important that a forum be available in which these women could discuss their common problems and experiences.[13] The value of including the group as a basic component of Home-SAFE has been amply demonstrated. The parents view the group as something for themselves and attend with remarkable regularity. They look forward to seeing each other, and some view the group as "the bright spot of the week". It is a time to exchange information on jobs, the availability of apartments which accept children, discuss the children and their progress, but most of all, it is an opportunity to be one's self with other adults in the same boat. Even in the age of the liberated woman, making it on one's own can be an exhausting and ambivalently rewarding endeavor.

Occasionally some parents regard the parent group as a therapeutic opportunity to obtain long needed help for themselves. For others the group appears to be an emotionally corrective experience where one can test out new ways of relating. For those parents whose life style has been "when in doubt, act out", the group performs the holding role in helping the individual to withstand frustration and to strive toward long term goals rather than seeking immediate gratification. The acutely or chronically psychotic parent has benefited least from the group experience. The group members will work patiently with such a parent for a few sessions, but when the individual is unable to respond and utilize its help, the group itself becomes threatened. Such a disturbed parent seems to undermine the relatively low anxiety threshhold of the other parents. This is especially true when the disturbed parent's behavior is reflected in or related to her role as a parent. The group is firm and united in its belief that the child's welfare must take precedence over the mother's irrational behavior. Inasmuch as many of the parents have character disordered problems, the support of the group and its ability to cut through rationalization and confront a group member has considerable impact.[25] The respect of other parents is highly valued.

The parent group, despite its open-end quality, is markedly cohesive. The group is purposely unstructured to permit the parents to talk about those things which are of concern to them. However, it can be utilized administratively to bring parents up to date with changes in the program and to give them information about their children.[16] The parents are permitted and encouraged to utilize the group in ways to meet their needs. Sometimes a group member will bring a friend, usually a man, to the group. It is as though the group serves the role of the extended family, and bringing a male companion to the group may be a little like taking the boy friend home to meet the family in the past. Occasionally the group has a guest speaker. Mainly the group prefers to talk about themselves. This can be the loss of a job, a problem of finding housing, conflict with one's youngster or in the words of one parent, just "feeling shitty".

Recurring themes in the group are life and death. The trauma of birth is re-lived in group sessions. Many times a mother will describe going alone, in labor, to the hospital, there to be handled by indifferent and impersonal staff, in this the most personal of experiences; and of returning to an empty apartment with the newborn baby. The physical as well as emotional aspects of labor and birth are re-experienced, and are accompanied by feelings of desertion and abandonment by significant male figures. Superficially these traumatic experiences appear unconnected to current ambivalent feelings toward their children. Attempts to relate the theme are met with avoidance and denial.

The theme of death runs parallel to that of birth. Parents express concern about who will care for their children if something happens to them. Will Council take over the rearing of their children? Many of the parents feel that they have no one they trust to raise their child if the ultimate should occur. As the parents talk about these weighty matters, feelings of isolation, depression and loneliness are touchingly apparent.

The parents seem to have made an institutional kind of transference to the program and see the entire Council of Jewish Women as the helping person. They have occasion to meet the volunteers who work with their children in the day care homes, and frequently hear about volunteer activities from their children. The volunteer who serves as co-therapist with the group is viewed psychologically and literally as "the good Jewish mother". Her considerable knowledge of pop culture makes a comfortable bridge over the generation gap, as does her ability to accept their value system without capitulating her own.

The parent's relationship with the day care mother, though occasionally tinged with ambivalence, is strikingly positive. A parent who is highly conflicted in her own parental role, predictably, has the most problems with day care mother.

The program policies are determined by the Home-SAFE Management Committee composed

of specially selected Council volunteers. This group of knowledgeable lay people is responsible for the stewardship of funds for the program and general policy. Individuals on the Management Committee represent a wide range of personal and professional expertise. Their knowledge of child care in the community is impressive as is their ability to testify on child care matters before legislative bodies. In addition to the general overseeing of the program, individual Committee members assume specific responsibilities essential for the operation of the program. Their knowledge and commitment to quality child care is unwaivering.

However, no committee could have been adequately prepared for our first six months' experience with the program. Without the advantage of a previously used and available blueprint, we attempted to put together the multi-faceted, creative program that comprises Home-SAFE. The experience was fraught with all the inherent difficulties of innovative programs and were compounded by archaic licensing regulations for day care, a group of parents who seemed to move from one crisis to another, an unanticipated shortage of volunteers, and other vicissitudes. At the end of six months, the possibility of providing quality care to a large number of children and parents appeared questionable. It seemed that it took all available professional staff time, and more, just to keep even, and expansion could only occur gradually and as Committee members and other volunteers took increased responsibility for more of the day to day operations of the program. In addition, the Management Committee had to face the reality that the parent, who they had originally thought would use the program, was yet to be found. This parent was envisioned as being relatively problem-free with the exception of needing child care, of being financially solvent and responsible in her behavior, and might even occasionally be Jewish, as well. No one was prepared for a large number of disturbed parents, who in spite of careful screening, needed and were utilizing our child care service and whose mental needs exceeded those we were set up to meet.

Our survey of the first six months' activities in Home-SAFE gave Staff and Management

Committee alike an opportunity to review its program and made changes. Many of the tasks carried out by the project director during the initial stages of the program were considered appropriate for more volunteer involvement, including aspects of home finding. The parent group was thought by some committee members to be the major source of difficulty and was viewed as the spawning ground in which the parents' problems were born. Others believed we should confine our efforts to parent education, and not be concerned with other aspects of the parent lives, even when these areas of functioning adversely affected parental capacity.

As Home-SAFE moves toward the completion of its first year, the program is increasingly fulfilling its promise. We are finding good day care homes, and the children who need care to fill them. Also, there is now a group of parents who have been in the program long enough to have achieved a level of stability in their lives to be able to serve as ballast for new parents when they experience crisis. The children's behavior reflects these changes in their parents' lives, and we see greater consistency between the child's experience in the day care home and in his own home.

We believe that we are now at a point when we can begin to examine our program empirically, and put to the scrutiny of statistical analysis those changes in the children and their parents which we have clinically observed. We believe that our program may provide material for comparative studies on family day care. We believe our clinical data can also serve to test theoretical treatment models, and make significant contributions to knowledge in the field of day care for young children and work with single parents.

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